

HARD-EARNED HOPE

Sermon delivered by Rev. Chris Garrison

Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church

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Scripture: Romans 5:1-5

It is a privilege to be here today. Over the years, I've heard of this mythical place, which only appears after the long months of winter—only to disappear again when the summer is gone. The legend among circle the of clergy states that only the best preachers and speakers are allowed to enter these walls. So I have no idea how you got me.

As your guest, I am faced with this critical question. Do I address the elephant in the room, or are you sick and tired of hearing about it? The elephant is the last 16 months of anxious uncertainty we've globally endured. Looking back, the novel coronavirus is just one piece of a greater dis-ease in our nation. The unrest was woven through the fabric of society—race, politics, the economics of the haves and have-nots, what is ruled essential and nonessential.

Throughout these 16 months, studies show higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression across diverse populations. Mental health constitutes the hidden symptom of pandemic. There was an 8,000% increase in the need for mental health services. There remain long wait lists for patients and not enough therapists. There is no vaccine for all the mental health pandemic—it affected us all to one degree or another.

In this time, we could all use a little hope. Stress, anxiety, depressed mood, they all are normal parts of everyday living. Normal levels of stress and anxiety actually help the body prepare for whatever challenge lies ahead. Stress, anxiety, low mood can help signal something is not quite right so we can productively work through it. But when those levels reach moderate to higher levels, we could all use a little help and more than a little hope.

The Scriptures speak of a hope that is more than fleeting, more than wish fulfillment. They speak of a hope that can be an eternal source of strength in the midst of adversity. It is this

type of hope that is our lesson today. In Romans Chapter 5, the apostle Paul writes of the hope we have being justified by faith in the Lord Jesus. He writes:

Therefore, since we are justified [in other words, cleared of guilt] by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."

Let us pray.

Pain May Be a Teacher

The apostle Paul knew something about suffering and pain. He was beaten, left for dead, shackled, imprisoned—all for his beliefs. Paul reframes suffering as something productive. It sets off a chain reaction.

"...suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope..."

From a physical standpoint, how can suffering be productive? It is a natural tendency to avoid pain as much as possible. Pain is the neurological indicator that something is wrong, something to be avoided. Touch a hot stove, take your hand away. The typical response is to run away from pain, not embrace it. But the lesson today seems to say: Pain may be a teacher.

Those who go through orthopedic surgery, like knee or hip surgery, they learn the lesson. Sometimes there is greater pain in the healing than the presenting symptoms. Physical therapy inflicts pain so that healing can occur. Muscles are torn so they can grow stronger, more resilient. Pain can be a sign of healing, of getting stronger.

Pain may be a teacher emotionally as well. Those who confront their fears, surface their traumas, and work through complex issues experience the pain in order to heal. I say pain *may*

be a teacher—if we choose to accept pain’s lessons. We are given an opportunity to learn. It is our choice to take it.

Pain can take a while to teach us what we need to learn. If there’s a lesson to learn in this situation, can I learn it already so I can move on? Building character takes time.

Character Has Been Co-opted

“...suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope...”

In some circles, character has become a code word for a certain ideological bent. The aim in this case is that everyone conforms to a narrow definition of right. Character is the code word for making children behave more than making good citizens concerned for the common good.

Character in the case of today’s lesson is different than simple behavior. In this passage, the word means tested, proven. Character is the result of a long process of behaving in a certain way—either for good or ill. Traits like bravery, justice, perseverance, wisdom, excellence, generosity, good judgement are proven over time. They are more evidence-based than inherent qualities within us. They are the result of long lessons learned. Our behavior illustrates these virtues, which prove our character over time.

Hope of the World

“...suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us...”

I don’t know about that last bit. I’ve certainly been disappointed by hope. Naomi from the Hebrew Scriptures experienced the disappointment from the tremendous loss in her life. She lost her husband and buried both her sons. She lived in a patriarchal system where women could not own land and where food was a scarce commodity. Naomi knew suffering. In our reading today, she changes her name. *“Do not call me Naomi [which means pleasant], call me Mara [which means bitter] because the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me”* (Ruth 1:20).

Beyond our reading, the story unfolds to show how her daughter-in-law Ruth endured and proved her character to care for Naomi. In kind, Naomi then orchestrated a way for Ruth to marry a man who would treat them kindly and provide a place in society for them again. Suffering produced endurance, endurance proved character, and character brought hope.

The child born from that union became the great-grandfather of David, the king who would unite the kingdom. David's descendent became an itinerant peasant preacher/healer who suffered and died for his beliefs. One who would later become the hope of the world.

"...knowing suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."

When I've been disappointed by hope, it's because I've hoped for the wrong things. I've hoped for that which I thought would make me happy: temporal things. I need to hope for the lessons learned from the pain. Learning the lessons doesn't remove the pain. Learning the lessons shapes my character, giving space for the eternal love to be poured into my heart from above. That love is available to all. That hope will not disappoint, because God's love is eternal.

It is my great hope that you and I experience a touch of that eternal today. Love is more lasting than happiness. The eternal will carry us through what pain has to teach us in this time. Hope will help us endure whatever comes our way.

Romans 5:1-5

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